

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 57)—JAMES HANLEY of Kilfinane

(By SEAMUS O'CRALLAIGH)

WHEN the G.A.A. was in its infancy, a tournament inaugurated the birth of hurling in Kilfinane, the Stakers and Ballyhea playing the first game there, with the Coarse Field the venue.

Kilfinane Emmets were then established, and played their opening match against Gormanstown, which they won. During the next two seasons they gained three cups, as the result of participation in tournaments at Ballyorgan, Bulgaden and Elton. They won their first set of medals at Ballylanders in 1899, playing the semi-final and final on the same day.

To demonstrate the interest taken in the games then a story is told concerning a player named Fuster Linane, who got a stroke over his eye during one of the matches. Father Buckley, seeing the wound, remarked: "Your face is ruined", to which Linane replied: "I'd rather lose my eye than lose the match."

Kilfinane also participated this year in a tournament at Shanballymore. As was usual in those days before a match, some players when stripped started a hop, step and jump. Dan Shanahan, who was a player that day settled the issue in his first jump. Of course, in Kilfinane then they had athletics every evening, with Shanahan, Jack and Mick Connery, Denny Carey and a host of others, who helped to emblazon the name of the little town on the front page of the athletic history of Ireland.

Kilfinane played Knockaney and Mungret in the 1897 County Limerick Senior Hurling Championship, and met Cappamore for the final, at the Markets Field on 1st May, 1898, and after a terrific struggle they came out victorious by a solitary point, 4-9 to 4-8.

EARLY DAYS OF HURLING IN KILFINANE.

It was difficult to get a field at Kilfinane around that time of the year and the late John Tobin told me they often practiced on the mountain. Another Sunday the hurlers went into the Parish Priest's Field. In due course he came along in his four wheeler and shouted to "clear out." The boys were stripped for a match at the time and only went to the other end of the field. The priest had his field glasses up trying to know who was there and, at last, opened the gate and driving in picked up a coat and boots and drove off. Needless to say the coat and boots were back in good time and the lads were never without a subscription from him to carry on the game.

In January, 1896, Kilfinane lost to Ballyhea, then, Cork County champions, by a point, and from then until July 1902, the South Limerick lads never knew defeat.

On their road to the All-Ireland success of 1897—Limerick's first in hurling—they beat Tulla, Croke Cup holders; Blackrock in the Munster final, and Tullaroan (Kilkenny), in the All-Ireland decider, played at Tipperary on November 20th, 1898.

In March, 1899, Kilfinane met Blackrock again, at Mallow, this time for the Croke Cup. The match resulted in a draw, and in the same grounds, six weeks later, Kilfinane won the re-play. They then defeated Galway, and in the final, at Thurles, won once more from Kilkenny. Most Rev. Dr. Croke attended this match and blessed the teams.

In that same year, in the first round of the County Championship, Kilfinane met Doon, at Hös-

pital, and in this match Tom Brazil played and also his father.

During their unbeaten spell, the Kilfinane lads won eleven sets of medals—including the All-Ireland and Croke Cup souvenirs, a Munster Championship and two County titles.

ONE OF THE GREATEST OF THEM ALL.

In a recent discussion on the merits of some well-known hurlers, the name of James ("Sean Og") Hanley, of Kilfinane, was mentioned as one of the greatest of them all.

Let us then dwell on the manly form of dashing James, the renowned full-back of the first Limerick side, to wear the hurling Blue Riband.

First let me explain the Gaelic appellation "Sean Og" that stuck to him from his first appearance on the hurling field, beneath the hillside town. Then a strapping young lad of fifteen, with a peculiar style, James Hanley reminded spectators of a famous player and athlete of the old type, of generations before, called Sean Hanley. The youngster was his grandson, and an onlooker who appreciated the old man's worth, and delighted with the young debutante, exclaimed: "Another 'Sean Og.'"

Growing rapidly, loose limbed and strong, in a vintage athletic spell, around Kilfinane, "Sean Og" at twenty years was a star in the senior firmament. His first great game was against the Limerick Shamrocks, from whom the famous Young Ireland Club sprang a few years later—and took place at Kilmallock on a June day in 1896. On that occasion his sweeping drives, almost from goal to goal, were the outstanding features of the game.

"Sean Og" held his hurley right-hand down—he was a natural left-hander, or "citeog." His lift and turn were like lightning and his strength prodigious.

He was one of the famous combination of Limerick hurlers—the Kilfinane Emmets—which won the All-Ireland "double"—the championship and Croke Cup for the year 1897, and of which mention has already been made.

Those who remember the brilliant selection of hurlers which did duty for Kilfinane cannot forget what a splendid place "Sean Og" held in that great team. During years when the winning of the Munster honours was regarded as a very prelude to the greatest victory, when Cork and Tipperary were sending forth teams never surpassed before and seldom equalled since, the Kilfinane Emmets startled the hurling loving public by a brilliant succession of triumphs in the county and provincial championship ties and wound up their successes by a decisive victory in the All-Ireland Final over Tullaroan, the Leinster champions.

SUPERB DISPLAYS.

In every contest preceding that welcome triumph, and more especially in the Munster ties, the superb display of "Sean Og" made his name familiar throughout the

land, and most deservedly so, for he possessed every essential quality of an expert and redoubtable wielder of the caman—active, keen of resource, quick in attack and clean and decisive in defence and delivery. Six feet one inch tall, he weighed around fourteen stone in his prime. Quiet as a child, he depended on his art with the caman rather than bustling tactics to win his matches. His pucks-out from goal were of surpassing length.

In every aspect James Hanley, at that period of his highest vigour, was well worthy to carry such a popular and significant title as "Sean Og." Few, if any, handled the caman with greater grace, and the pathos of his untimely death in exile strikes the heart, and imagination like a winter blast.

He went to Dublin in 1899, with the intention of settling there, and during his stay often figured in Jones's Road with the County champions—the well known Commercials team.

London ultimately claimed him, and he must have found at least congenial exiles amidst the active clubs then existing in the English capital. He joined the Emmets in memory of old Kilfinane—and was a member of the London Irish team that gave a memorable game to Tipperary in the All-Ireland final of 1900. A year later the exiles came back to take the Blue Riband over the sea for the first and only time—but "Sean Og" was missing on that occasion.

One of the best games the championship has known was that between London Irish and Tipperary. Playing with the breeze, the home lads had a four points lead in the first quarter. Then the exiles' defence opened out—Hanley, O'Brien and Horgan sending long, accurate clearances that let their forwards put across a trio of minor scores. Tom Semple, that grand hurler, put Tipperary in the way of a white flag, in an exciting bout, and the interval came with Tipperary leading, five points to three.

A WONDERFUL SECOND HALF.

It was a wonderful second half, the exiles attacked relentlessly—and a pair of points brought the teams level amidst scenes of wild enthusiasm, Dubliners were behind the London-Irish to a man, for the Irish-Ireland revival was then pulsating in the metropolis, and London-Irish were the symbols of the scattered but yet unconquered spirit of the Irish race.

When an exile forward doubled through London's sixth point for the lead pandemonium reigned. Barriers broke down with a crash before the swaying, excited crowd, but the pitch held clear in those vital last minutes. "Sean Og" Hanley's sweeping left-handers were a feature. Then a tragic event happened. Dan Horgan, the London captain, playing a great game, came out to clear a loose ball. It stopped dead in a rut unexpect-

tedly. He put his hand to it expecting a hop, but fouled it on the sod.

Three minutes to go, it was Tipperary's last chance. Hayes pitched the shot to the goalmouth—in tore Mike Maher and company, and like a whirlwind swept London defenders, ball and all, through the posts for a goal. There was a wild Tipperary roar. The puck out was weak, and in a flash Gleeson and O'Keefe were on it to goal again just before the whistle sounded on an epic game.

Victor and vanquished were stormed by admirers. Tipperary had held the title at home but the gallant losers were cheered to the echo. Their reception that day gave them fresh heart and spirit, which helped them achieve their ambition a year later at the expense of Cork in another astonishing game.

HIS UNTIMELY END.

For thirteen years "Sean Og" Hanley laboured in the fogs and fumes of London, to which he was so little suited. A neglected cold found a weak spot, but up to the last the old call was for him insistent; the old arena held a captivity he could not resist; but a powerful and relentless enemy asserted a sway and the buoyant and daring hurler, the favoured and formidable champion had to yield all too early to the inevitable peace of death.

All too young the thrills and trials of life were ended, but loving and inspiring recollections will preserve his personality and his performances safe among the traditions of the game, in which he played so many a part.

By way of conclusion, I will let "Carbery" give his impressions of him: "Sean Og" (Jim Hanley) was certainly "the man of his hour." Six feet one, built on loose and ample lines, that kindly fair-haired giant was a joy to see in action. He hurled "right hand down" and did his best work from the left—the Yankees would call him a "Southpaw" in their descriptive way. Sean starred for Limerick in the 'nineties. His energy was endless; his overhead drives a field length, and his speed astonishing, for such a huge man. He hurled for Dublin and then for London Irish. His fame will live for ever. He died early—widely loved and respected.

No. 58—Con Kiely, of Ballylanders.